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Resolving Church Conflict¹

BOB RUSSELL

Early in my ministry at Southeast, a conflict developed between an associate minister and me. The elders asked the associate to resign. He refused to do so, and decided to take the matter before the full board. At that time, the full board of elders and deacons had the authority to override the elders (which was a bad structure that we later changed). The associate sent a ten-page letter to all the deacons relating some of the disagreements and detailing his conversations with some of the elders and with me.

At the monthly elders' and deacons' meeting, there was sharp division among the leadership. When it became obvious to the associate that he didn't have the necessary votes to remain, he resigned in anger. Then he wrote a letter to the entire congregation detailing his disagreements, promising he would be outside the church on Sunday morning offering the ten-page document he had prepared! And he kept his promise.

For the next two months, the associate continued to lead a Sunday school class in his home, and stirred up further dissension. Each week after his class, he and the class members would drive to church and sit in the first three rows of the sanctuary, scowling at me!

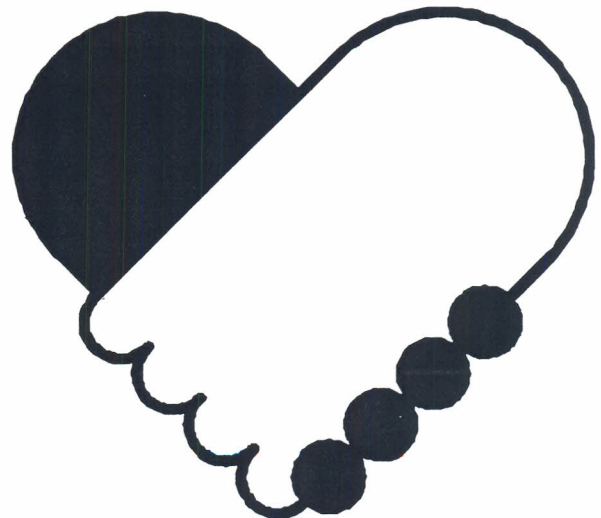
While this conflict was going on, a church in another town invited me to become their preacher. The offer was really attractive. I reasoned that I was part of the problem in the conflict at Southeast and here was my way out of the trouble.

In the midst of the problem, I came home one day to find my five-year-old son jumping up and down for joy, pointing to the living room. There sat a brand new, large, color television set to replace our tiny old black-and-white model. The elders had pooled their own money to get that gift for me. The chairman of the board called me that night. He said, "We know you've received an offer to go elsewhere. We're not trying to bribe you. We just wanted you to know that we appreciate you and hope you'll stay with us through this difficulty. We're unanimously behind you."

One of the reasons the church survived through that difficulty was that the elders were united. All the elders agreed that they needed to ask the associate to resign, and they stayed with that decision in spite of the criticisms they received.

GOD BLESSES HARMONIOUS CHURCHES

By contrast, I once preached a revival for a church that was split right down the center aisle. The people on one side of the aisle hated the people on the other side, and vice versa. They didn't even speak to those who sat on the other side. I asked about the problem and discovered that it all started with the church softball team.



One of the elders was the team's coach, and he refused to play the son of another elder in an important game. After heated words were exchanged between the two elders, they wouldn't speak to each other. Everybody in the congregation began to choose sides, and a war of silence ensued. Needless to say, there wasn't much revival there—and there won't be until there is harmony among the leaders.

I doubt that God ever blesses a bickering church. God loves the church. The Bible says God hates the one who sows discord among the body (Prov 6:19, KJV). It's a dangerous thing to wound or divide the body of Christ. But when there is harmony, the Holy Spirit flows and God blesses the church.

In Jesus' prayer to his father the night before he was crucified, he prayed for his disciples. Then he prayed for all of us who would come to believe in him through their message. And he prayed for one specific thing among us so that the world would know God had truly sent his son. What was the one thing needed to prove the deity of Christ? The ability to perform miracles? Powerful preaching? Great music? No, Jesus prayed for harmony—"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).²

STEPS TO HARMONY

If you've ever been in a fighting church, you'll never want to be there again. One man who was in a church battered by division—so much so that they'd had three preachers in as many years—said to me, "I notice one of your slogans is, 'Speaking the truth in love.' We don't have a church slogan, but if we did it would be, 'If you want to fight, go to First Christian!'"

Keep Your Ego Under Control

It's been said that EGO stands for Edging God Out. The number one cause of division in churches today is pride. People become proud of their influence and status, so much so that when one threatens their little seat of power they will come out fighting. They will pretend they have the church's best interests at heart, but the real issue is a matter of *who's in charge*.

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A preacher in a rural area who had a very successful ministry was asked why so many country churches were stagnant. He said that in many small churches there are one or two families that for generations have controlled the church. Their influence in the church becomes a matter of pride and power for them. They resist any new leader or new idea because it threatens their little empire.

If there's one primary reason that Southeast Christian Church has maintained harmony, it is that we have church leaders who have kept their egos under control. Unity requires humility. The leaders of your church need to adopt this attitude: It doesn't matter who gets the credit as long as the job gets done.

Be Flexible

When we moved into our new building, I knew there would be a time of adjustment. There were rooms that still weren't carpeted, offices that still weren't completed, signs that still weren't erected. I challenged our staff to adopt an attitude of flexibility. Someone introduced a "tenth beatitude": *Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent of shape*. Our staff remained flexible, and everyone got along great even though conditions weren't ideal at first.

Develop a Sense of Humor

The church that frequently laughs together is more likely to be healthy because it is more likely to be

harmonious. A healthy, genuine sense of humor can smooth over hurt feelings, relax tense moods, and make bitter pills of confrontation easier to swallow. One of our elders once expressed his displeasure in a board meeting over our decision occasionally to move the Lord's Supper to the end of one of the worship services. He felt that it was compromising the importance of communion, which had always been in the middle of the service. The Lord's Supper should be in the center of the worship service, "because the Bible says the Lord's Supper is to be the center of worship," he said.

"Where does the Bible say that?" someone asked.

He paused, then said, "Well, if it doesn't, it should!" He laughed, then everybody laughed, and the meeting moved on without further discussion.

Respect the Leaders

The Bible commands, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13:17). When members of the church criticize the leadership—when they second-guess, ridicule, politic, recruit opposition, and circulate petitions—they make the work of the leaders a burden and wound the church.

Avoid Controversy If Possible

Paul wrote, "Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless" (Titus 3:9).

People can talk for hours about different views of prophecy—the premillennial versus amillennial debate. No one can prove the other wrong, despite what some of them on both sides think! Theologians can talk for hours about the difference between God's sovereignty and man's free will. One can spend an entire Sunday school class discussing whether God created the world in six twenty-four-hour segments. A

lot of us think we're spiritual because we can argue about such religious questions, and we're convinced we've got the answers. In fact, you might be a little uneasy right now after reading the beginning of this paragraph because I hinted that you can't prove your side of one of those debates! Remember that it's one thing to be able to discuss theology, but it's quite another thing to be able to live like Christ—to be kind at home or diligent at work or forgiving of the one who wronged you.

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Confront Divisive People When Necessary

Paul told Titus, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Titus 3:10). A divisive person is someone who is threatening the harmony of the church, not just someone who disagrees with you! But there are times when a person's contentious spirit, false teaching, or immoral lifestyle threatens to divide the body of Christ. Such a person must be confronted.

Churches today are very hesitant about any church discipline at all. Ours is an era in which everyone wants to be free to live as one pleases. But as Stuart Briscoe said, "If proper discipline is not applied where appropriate, the result will be a marked decline in the nature of the church."

Practice Servanthood

The best way to maintain harmony in the church is to get the congregation to think more of others than they do of themselves. I've never met a contentious servant. When people devote themselves to doing good, they don't have time for criticism. When people serve others, they become positive and cooperative.

Be Quick to Forgive

I've often told the story of the time I forgot that I was to perform the wedding ceremony for a couple in our church. On Saturday afternoon, I had gone to watch my son play baseball. When I returned, my wife said in a panicky tone, "We've been trying to find you for an hour and a half. You were supposed to do a wedding this afternoon. Did you forget?"

My heart sank to my feet.

Immediately the rationalizations formed: it was a small wedding, the rehearsal took place several days before the ceremony, I had another wedding that day, it was on a Saturday—my usual day off. But the bottom line was I forgot the most important event in the life of a couple in our church. There was no valid excuse. I discovered that the wedding had been delayed for a few minutes until one of our associate ministers was located and agreed to step in. I quickly drove to the church and arrived just as the photographer was completing his picture-taking after the ceremony. Having to apologize to that young couple was one of the low points of my ministry.

I learned a lot from that experience. I turned over my calendar to my secretary rather than try to handle all my appointments myself, and I reordered my life so that I wouldn't be as likely to run out of margins.

But one of the most valuable lessons I learned from that experience was that our elders were willing to forgive. They didn't chastise me or threaten to fire me if it happened again. They helped me delegate responsibility, supported me in spite of my failures, encouraged me, and forgave me. No leader is perfect, and a good leader learns to forgive occasional blunders.

My sons used to fight with each other a lot. I guess that's normal among children, but it really bothered me that they didn't always get along. I remember my lowest day as a father. When my two sons were teenagers, they got into a fistfight. I heard them shouting and banging around in their room, and I bolted upstairs to break up a nasty fight. (I know you probably can't imagine such a thing in a preacher's home. You thought we spent most of our time sitting in a circle reading the Bible and praying.) I don't expect children to be perfect, but I was so disappointed in my sons for fighting. Why couldn't they get along?

Our heavenly father feels the same way about us. It grieves the heart of God when his children bicker and fight with each other. One of the best ways to honor the father is to make every effort to see that his children get along with each other.

My sons get along much better today than they did as teenagers. There's one big reason: *maturity*. It's a joy to see one's family mature, to get to the point where they enjoy being with one another, laughing together, and loving each other. As we mature in Christ, we should become more harmonious, not more contentious. A divisive, dogmatic spirit is not a mark of maturity, but of immaturity. The Bible says that *peace* is one of the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22). If it grieves the father when we fight, it must bring joy to his heart when we maintain harmony in the church.

BOB RUSSELL

Mr. Russell is the pastor of the Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

1 This article is excerpted from "Maintain a Spirit of Harmony" in Bob Russell, *When God Builds a Church: 10 Principles for Growing a Dynamic Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2000), 147-171.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are from the New International Version.